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ABSTRACT

School-based early childhood centers are high-quality programs using approaches to instruction based on recognized principles of child development and learning for children 3 to 8 years old. The centers are characterized by the active involvement of parents and the community and by a commitment to smooth transitions from home to school and through the primary grades. In June, 1992, a forum was held to review the experiences of early innovators of the early childhood center concept and to identify policy issues that need to be addressed if the concept is to achieve its promise. Of broad concern across five Northwest states were the following: (1) the implementation of developmentally appropriate curricula; (2) the improvement of assessment practices; (3) responsiveness to increasing cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity; (4) provision of appropriate time structures; (5) use of school space; (6) administrator and teacher training; (7) family support structures; (8) full parent participation; (9) the involvement of parents in decision making; (10) the integration of child services; (11) the promotion and maintenance of community commitment; (12) support for school-wide change; (13) provision of preschool services; (14) the development of systems for the sharing of timely information; and (15) the provision of transition services. For each of these issues, the report discusses the policy options open to local schools to facilitate the operation of strong early childhood centers. (AC)

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# SCHOOL-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTERS:

# OPTIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY ACTION

November 1992

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Child, Family, and Community Program

PS 021299

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS


INTRODUCTION ..... 1
- The Northwest Context ..... 1
- The Importance of Policy ..... 1
  - The Early Childhood Center Concept ..... 2
  - The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Developmental Partners ..... 2
- Policy Issues Identified by Decisionmakers ..... 3
- From Policy Issues to Policy Options ..... 3

POLICY OPTIONS FOR LOCAL SCHOOLS
- Feature #1: Quality programs whose practices are based on recognized principles of child development and learning for children three to eight years old ..... 4
  - Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum ..... 4
  - Improving Assessment ..... 5
  - Responding to Cultural/Linguistic/Developmental Diversity . 7
  - Providing Appropriate Time Structure ..... 8
  - Use of School Space ..... 9
  - Teacher and Administrator Training ..... 10
- Feature #2: Active involvement of parents as partners in their children's development ..... 11
  - Building Family Support Structures ..... 11
  - Achieving Full Parent Participation ..... 12
  - Encouraging Parental Involvement in Decisionmaking ..... 13
- Feature #3: Active community involvement ..... 13
  - Collaborating in Service Integration ..... 14
  - Community Commitment ..... 14
  - Support for School-Wide Change ..... 15
- Feature #4: A commitment to providing smooth transitions from the home into the preschool and through the primary grades--whether the preschool program takes place at school or in the community .... 15
  - Provision of Preschool Services ..... 16
  - Information Sharing ..... 16
  - Transition Services ..... 17

CONCLUSION ..... 18

REFERENCES ..... 19

APPENDICES
- A ..... 20
- B ..... 21

# INTRODUCTION

## The Northwest Context

*America knows how to prepare children to be successful in school and in life.*
Marion Wright Edelman
President, Children's Defense Fund

Although America may know how, conditions continue to challenge the young children who are striving to succeed in our elementary schools and the families and educators working to support their efforts. Every day, thousands of young children in the Northwest start their day ill-prepared to function physically and socially. Some are tired and many hungry; too often, for poor and affluent alike, their families are themselves suffering stress and poorly prepared to provide the support and nurturance children need.

The implications for the schools that serve these children and their families are enormous. Simply adding new programs has already been shown to be an inadequate response; changes in the deepest structures of these schools--the assumptions teachers make about learning and teaching, the ways in which time is organized and used, the expectations held for parents and the communities which nurture them--all must be examined and adapted to fit the realities which surround them.

In 1988, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) issued *Right from the Start*, a landmark report. Based on research that documents the lasting benefits of early childhood programs providing quality comprehensive services, it called for restructuring elementary programs to improve outcomes for children and families.

Since that time, pockets of experimentation have sprung up across the Northwest. In 1990, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) launched a five-year effort in which it works with such "early innovators" to learn from their experiences and extend the research and development support necessary to increase the systemic impact of these important efforts. NWREL organized its work under the rubric of the the early childhood center concept.

## The Importance of Policy

Like NASBE, NWREL recognizes that changes of such magnitude cannot occur without the support of policy. In its research and development efforts, the Laboratory set out to identify the ways in which policies might need to be changed from the "bottom up," that is, by looking first at what those struggling to implement the concept saw as the needs for policy action and/or modification.

Once an initial set of such needs had been identified, the Laboratory brought its "developmental partners," the early adopters with which it is working, together with a Northwest group of educational leaders and legislators to identify the policy issues that must be addressed if the early childhood center concept is to achieve its

promise for systemic change. This paper presents those issues. A companion paper, prepared under the auspices of NWREL'S Center for State Studies, will examine the options for state policymakers in addressing each of them.

**The Early Childhood Center Concept**

In many communities, the vehicle for achieving school readiness is the **school-based early childhood center** (Jewett, 1991), which differs from other early childhood or early elementary programs precisely because it takes the comprehensive, community-based approach. School-based early childhood centers are characterized by:

- High-quality programs whose approaches to instruction are based on recognized principles of child development and learning for children three to eight years old
- Active involvement of parents as partners in their children's development
- Active involvement of the community in the program and reciprocity between community and center in addressing and utilizing family/community needs and resources
- A commitment to smooth transitions from the home into the preschool and through the early primary grades--whether the preschool program takes place at school or in the community

Early childhood centers adapt their programs to the way children naturally learn, rather than expecting children to conform to what must seem a contrived classroom setting. "Teachers recognize that learning for young children does not occur in narrowly defined subject areas. Rather, skills and knowledge such as reading and mathematics are integrated into a variety of activities such as cooking, dramatic play, art, music, science and social studies projects." (*Right From the Start,* p.12) The center classroom is unlikely to contain rows of desks. Children may discuss and read and interact in groups on the floor and move from one activity area to another to satisfy their natural curiosity. At this stage of their development, worksheets are seldom used, although as children grow, they are provided with more complex learning activities and materials.

Early childhood center teachers see children in the contexts of their families and communities and want to make sure that learning begun at home continues after school starts, that children have healthy bodies and supportive environments, that they are well cared for, that their cultural backgrounds are understood and honored, and--above all--that they are taught in ways that take advantage of their natural curiosity and do not dampen their desire to learn.

**The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Developmental Partners**

In 1990, NWREL's Child, Family, and Community Program began identifying the key research-based characteristics of school-based early childhood centers presented above and used them to identify a small set of sites with which the Laboratory could

work to develop a foundation of understanding and technical assistance that can serve to speed the systemic impact of such centers throughout the region. This work included a focus on information about bridges and barriers to implementing the early childhood center concept in other locations.

By 1991, six sites had been selected and work with them begun. A seventh site was added in 1992. These sites represent rural, suburban, and urban programs in small and large school districts across all five Northwest states. They are listed in Appendix A.

## Policy Issues Identified by Decisionmakers

In June of 1992, NWREL convened a Decisionmakers' Forum, attended by educational leaders and legislators from Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington to review the experience of these early innovators of the early childhood center concept and identify policy issues that they felt need to be addressed if the concept is to achieve its promise across the region as a whole. The group included state legislators, state department of education early childhood specialists, school district administrators, and school principals. These participants are listed in Appendix B.

The policy needs of early childhood centers can best be discussed in the context of the four research principles that govern the work of the most effective centers: (1) high-quality programs based on recognized principles of child development and learning; (2) active involvement of parents; (3) active involvement of the community and responsiveness to its needs and resources; and (4) smooth transitions from the home into the preschool and from the preschool program into the early primary grades. The issues identified here are presented within this framework.

It should be recognized that specific policies are heavily impacted by the laws of each individual state. The issues presented here are those identified as of broad concern across the five-state region. No attempt is made to deal with the specifics of the laws or policies of a given state.

## From Policy Issues to Policy Options

Policy can best be defined as direction setting. The 15 specific issues identified here form the basis for thinking about how directions need to be shaped to better meet the developmental needs of the current generation of children and families served by our schools.

Obviously, some issues can be addressed locally by individual school boards with the assistance of their executive officer, the superintendent; others may require action at the state level, either in the creation of legislation or the making and interpretation of administrative rules. This paper will conclude with an examination of those policy actions which can be taken at the local level; a companion paper will explore the implications of these issues for state policy.

## POLICY OPTIONS FOR LOCAL SCHOOLS

### Feature #1: Quality programs whose practices are based on recognized principles of child development and learning for children three to eight years old

School-based early childhood center programs are qualitatively different from the traditional primary program. They raise issues in terms of both the organization of the school and the ways in which it conducts its day-to-day operation. These issues, each of which has policy implications include: (1) the implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum; (2) the improvement of assessment practices; (3) responsiveness to increasing diversity; (4) provision of appropriate time structures; (5) use of space; and (6) administrator and teacher training.

#### Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

While guidelines now exist for developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp, 1992), support is needed for the implementation of these guidelines in locally appropriate ways. In particular, elementary school staff must make major shifts in their assumptions and practices regarding the primary program, and preschool staff must work to develop curriculum processes that support children's potential for school success.

The majority of this work must be done "on the job," so that schools must find ways to support practicing teachers and administrators to make needed changes while program implementation is occurring. Schools can take such actions by examining the following aspects of their instructional program policies:

**Direct instruction vs. experience-based learning.** The implementation of developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum places a strong emphasis on child-initiated, experienced-based learning opportunities.

While this does not mean that direct instruction is never appropriate, teaching roles need to shift away from the teacher as instructor toward the teacher as facilitator and guide. Local policy can support this issue in the following ways:

- Redefine teacher roles to stress guidance and facilitation
- Design staff development and support systems that enable teachers to examine and adopt these roles and gain needed skills at classroom design and management
- Revamp teacher performance evaluations to be consistent with new role expectations
- Reorganize curriculum design and review processes, as well as implementation standards, to reflect the importance of experiential, child-initiated learning

**Materials and supplies.** The shift in instructional approach described above necessitates new approaches to classroom provisions and material use. Open-

ended, child-oriented manipulatives become a critical component of successful implementation efforts.

Districts and schools can exercise a variety of options for developing the needed inventory of materials and supplies:

- Reallocate funds, freed from a reduced need for textbook series and workbook/worksheet materials, toward more developmentally appropriate, "hands-on" supplies and materials, such as blocks, manipulatives, equipment sets for use in exploration and experimentation, and literature-based books

- Reprioritize purchasing, avoiding expensive "predesigned" educational materials and investing more in raw materials and lasting equipment that children use as they participate in learning activities

- "Phase in" purchase of more expensive materials by provisioning for one grade level or school unit at a time

**Grouping**. The nature of teacher-child interactions and the child's peer interactions are critical components in a quality early childhood center classroom. Grouping practices that support these features must be promoted. Policy options include:

- Provide leadership and support for school experimentation regarding cross-class collaborations, mixed-age groupings, and recruitment of volunteer support to increase adult child ratios

- Support flexible staffing patterns that encourage continuity of contact between children and staff over time; eliminate "categorical" classroom groupings (discussed below under "diversity"), freeing staff to work in mainstream classrooms, thus lowering class sizes and improving adult-child ratios

**Improving Assessment**

Standardized tests should not be used to exclude or defer placement of young children in classrooms or to place children in special programs (Bredekamp, 1992; Meisels, 1992). Further, exclusive use of standardized tests to measure the achievement of young children or to measure program effectiveness conflicts with the approach recommended for the early childhood center of developing continuous, authentic performance assessments of children. Local efforts to implement the early childhood center concept must deal with the issue of assessment throughout the process of implementation. Establishing priority outcomes, aligning assessment practices with these outcomes, and redesigning reporting procedures are all significant policy issues.

**Establishing priority outcomes**. Local policy options include:

- Provide strong support for establishing statements of mission, philosophy, and identified outcomes and impacts specifically for the early childhood center. Encouragement of community input and support for this process will anchor the efforts of the school and ensure local appropriateness as well as local support.

- Provide resources, such as research-based references identifying outcomes and strategies, strategic planning processes, and community involvement guidelines.

**Aligning assessment with outcomes.** Traditional assessment methods have undergone severe criticism for failing to measure "authentic" or meaningful learning outcomes. Local school districts and schools must develop new means for assessing learning and development outcomes which provide relevant and meaningful information about children's progress. Policy options include:

- Discontinue or greatly reduce use of standardized tests for children eight and under
- Build references and staff development support resources for awareness and review of alternative assessment methods
- Establish collaborative processes (including community representatives) for redesigning assessment practices based on identified outcomes
- Establish a realistic time frame and support system for replacement of traditional with alternative assessment methods. This approach may involve replacing assessment methods in one learning discipline at a time (for example, initial focus on literacy, then mathematics, etc.) or it may involve developing or adapting assessment approaches based on an already available "continuous curriculum" model.
- Examine impact of changes in outcomes and assessment practices on a system-wide basis, because expectations and assessment materials that shift from one school in a district to another can pose problems for the transition of children who move within the district.

**Reporting procedures.** Assessment practices inform teachers about children's learning progress, but they also are used to provide essential information to families and other school and community representatives. When assessment methods change, reporting systems must be reexamined. Local policy options include:

- Review reporting procedures. Local districts and schools can solicit the concerns and needs of parents and colleagues regarding reporting procedures. These concerns can be incorporated into realignment of reporting with the aforementioned outcomes and assessment practices.
- Change the nature of parent/teacher conferences and increase their number.
- Develop improved professional guidelines for conference reporting processes and written reporting procedures.

**Responding to Cultural/Linguistic/Developmental Diversity**

Early childhood populations represent an increasingly wide range of linguistic, cultural, and developmental backgrounds. Developmentally appropriate programs must be responsive to those backgrounds in ways which improve each child's success in school. This can be accomplished by utilizing (1) inclusive grouping practices, (2) honoring children's backgrounds and capabilities through curriculum planning, (3) incorporating the resources and beliefs of community representatives in program design and operation, and (4) including staff members who represent those diverse cultures and backgrounds in program implementation. Identified policy action options include grouping, new focused approaches to language development, and use of community resources.

**Grouping.** Research findings underlying the early childhood center concept stress the importance for all children of heterogeneous, "inclusive" groupings of children. In addition, mixed-age opportunities are important. This challenges traditional views of classroom groupings which may be very categorical, organizing children in groups according to specific age and/or ability standards. Policy options for addressing this issue include:

- Provide support for experimentation in terms of grouping practices such as: (1) mixed-age classrooms; (2) mainstreaming with "push-in" services in which support staff enter the mainstream classroom rather than pulling special needs children out; (3) peer tutoring and collaboration programs; and (4) other approaches to "family" groupings of children and staff

- Provide support for educational staff to exchange ideas and increase expertise regarding multicultural diversity and skills at dealing with special needs populations and varying language groups

- Reject practices that label young children or use early screening procedures to place them in categorical, noninclusive groups

**Language development.** The early childhood center concept underscores the critical importance of language development in the school success of the young child. Support for first language understanding and use as the foundation of emergent literacy skills is essential to the program. Policy options for supporting the early childhood center concept include:

- Provide support for classroom environments that allow non-English speakers to maintain their original language base and continue learning as they gain second language (English) skills

- Invest in staff development and curriculum implementation models that strongly stress language and communicative competency and emergent literacy models

- Provide support for staff development around issues of bilingual learning processes and cultural understanding

- Support development of classroom environments that encourage peer interaction, cooperative learning, and interpersonal problem solving: all vehicles for promoting communicative competence

- Provide support to parents in assisting children's development of strong language skills (speaking, listening, concept development, expression) in their native language, including English

**Use of community resources.** Children and families from diverse backgrounds benefit when the school environment reflects that diversity and offers interactions with staff with like cultural backgrounds. Policy options include:

- Build reciprocal relationships with community representatives who can serve as cultural and linguistic translators for school staff

- Recruit community representatives representing varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds for all levels of staff positions within schools

**Providing Appropriate Time Structures**

Early childhood center staff roles extend far beyond the role of the traditional classroom instructor. Teachers must have time to work closely with parents, community members, and educational colleagues in order to successfully implement integrated, comprehensive curriculum and services. In addition, the shift in teaching practices called for by the early childhood approach necessitates time for teachers to innovate and reflect on teaching practices with support from supervisors, coaches, or other teaching mentors.

**Instructional time.** The implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum changes both the nature and the use of time for instructional purposes. Teachers must work to integrate the curriculum in terms of relationships among traditional educational subjects as well as in terms of relevance to the specific lives and experiences of the children in the class. Work with families to extend the instructional impact of the school by strengthening home support for schooling and increasing teacher acceptance of parent input is essential to instruction.

These approaches require allocation of time for collaboration with the family and other teachers. Policy options for supporting this need include:

- Redefine traditional definitions and policies concerning "release time" so that teachers' opportunities to meet with each other and with parents "count" as instructional time if they meet criteria for focus on children's learning.

- Provide structures within schools to facilitate collaboration by such techniques as: (1) hiring aides or substitutes for regular staff development opportunities; (2) closing school early on a regular basis for curriculum planning and development work (a controversial option because it reduces children's time in school); (3) establishing buddy classrooms between primary and upper-level grades so that children can be supervised by one teacher; and (4) supporting volunteer or aide staff to allow teachers to meet with colleagues.

- Support efforts to integrate curriculum by revising standards that require specific amounts of time per day to be devoted to teaching in specific curriculum content areas.

**Planning time**. Promotion of integrated curriculum approaches and smooth transitions across levels or units of the early childhood center requires time for coordination among staff. Equally, staff making changes from traditional to developmentally appropriate teaching practices need time to plan and implement these changes.

**Support for interactions with parents and community.** In order for school staff to work effectively with families and other community members, they must make time to do so. This must happen at times that are mutually convenient. Drawing families and others into the school may require strong efforts to reach out during nontraditional hours.

Policy options related to providing appropriate time structures include:

- Adopt new policies regulating the hours when early childhood center teachers are expected to begin and end their work day
- Work closely with teacher association representatives to develop support for desired changes in working conditions
- Consider flexible time options such as late start or early release of students
- Support teacher flexibility to schedule meetings and work sessions
- Recognize the value of investing in teacher time for development and collaboration when designing budgets

**Use of School Space**

The early childhood center concept expands the population intended to be served by the elementary school as well as the nature of the program to be implemented. Adding service to preschool populations, who require smaller groups and lower adult-child ratios, as well as reconfiguring space so that children can work in activity centers and parents have a place to be inside the school building, can strain already overcrowded school sites.

**Reconfiguring space**. When programs begin to implement the early childhood center concept, space utilization shifts. Classrooms become organized around active learning centers rather than desks, and "common areas" for special play and active learning opportunities become valued. Grouping shifts may alter the ways in which classrooms are utilized as well. Space may be needed for parent support or comprehensive care activities within the school building as well.

**Creative acquisition.** Adding preschool service or extending the hours of service to preschoolers or kindergartners can also stress schools attempting to implement the early childhood center concept by adding additional space needs.

Local policy options include:

- Consider multiple uses of school space, for example, establishing multipurpose rooms for both preschoolers and primary students, and/or utilizing classrooms during non-instructional hours for other purposes
- Design and construct early childhood center classrooms that incorporate principles of flexible use
- Extend preschool services to already available community space
- Provide support for building alterations including altering classrooms (removing or adding dividers, installing carpeting, increasing child-accessible storage) or developing common areas for several classrooms to share

**Teacher and Administrator Training**

Practices based on recognized principles of child development and learning for children three to eight years old are typically not addressed in traditional teacher or principal certification programs. This knowledge base must be incorporated into teacher and administrator training programs and afforded to staff who are already "on the job." Further, support for *application* of the knowledge base must be provided, both in preservice and inservice programs.

**Principles of child development and learning.** Teachers and administrators who are implementing the early childhood center concept should acquire a strong foundation of understanding in this area. Policy options include:

- Provide resources and support for adding to the knowledge base of the early childhood center staff
- Provide support for the time needed by school staff to gain additional expertise
- Involve administrators and curriculum specialists in knowledge acquisition
- Emphasize child development and learning knowledge and experience in working with young children in developing criteria for hiring
- Establish relationships with colleges offering early childhood education programs, recruiting student teachers and fostering collaborative relationships with teacher training staff

**Opportunities for coaching and applied practice**. All school staff, including administrators, must have opportunities to gain a contextualized and applied understanding of the shifts in professional practice driven by child development and learning principles.

Policy options include:

- Invest staff development funds in coaching, mentoring, and peer tutoring processes that encourage reflective application of new knowledge
- Identify and support innovative programs for teacher/administrator visitation, observation, and discussions
- Require classroom/applied practice observations and visitations by early childhood center staff
- Promote study groups within and among early childhood centers

### Feature #2: Active involvement of parents as partners in their children's development

In school-based early childhood centers, parents and other family members who are closely involved with the care of young children are seen as central to the educational process. The school recognizes the critical role that families play in the lives of young children and finds ways to assess and serve family needs. Family support, then, becomes a school function. Further, the school honors parents as their children's first teachers and attempts to continue supporting children in ways that complement and extend the progress they have made before school entry.

The school works to find ways to support and sustain the involvement of all parents, including working parents who cannot participate in school activities during regular school hours, and parents are encouraged to contribute to the school's and district's decisionmaking process about the early childhood program. Parents' concerns, beliefs, and opinions are solicited and reflected in many aspects of program design and implementation.

This new understanding of families, including both their capabilities and their need for different relationships with the school raises a number of issues which significantly impact day-to-day operation and have significant policy implications. These issues include assuring appropriate family support, achieving full parent participation, and encouraging parental involvement in decisionmaking.

#### Building Family Support Structures

Families cannot support children's progress when they are unable to meet basic needs such as child care, employment, income, housing, and nutrition. The early childhood center concept defines a role for schools in terms of collaborating with all community social service providers to identify and help families access some of these basic needs, particularly those most directly impacting young children, such as nutrition and child care. This challenges the traditional school program to expand its scope of service and policies related to family support, facility use, and staffing by expanding the center's mission and working to meet family needs. Policy options include:

- Expand the mission statement of the center to include family support considerations

- Build a local base of understanding of family needs, their relationship to school outcomes, and awareness of resources for meeting them
- Implement home visits by center staff to build rapport with families and assess family circumstances
- Conduct periodic needs assessments to identify family support needs relevant to each center community
- Seek ways to add family support workers or community advocates to center staff
- Expand use of building or related school resources to support extended care and other basic needs of children and families
- Participate in establishing community-based family support centers

**Achieving Full Parent Participation**

Parent/family involvement in the young child's development and education is closely linked to successful short-term and long-term outcomes for students. The defining features of this involvement extend far beyond traditional expectations of homework support or classroom volunteerism to include: (1) fostering the child's development at home, (2) supporting transitions to school, and (3) being aware of and contributing in various ways to school activities. The early childhood center must find ways to work closely with families, taking into account their varying cultural and economic backgrounds as well as their work schedules. Centers must be flexible in seeking and arranging meetings between family members and school staff and in promoting an increase in this type of activity. Policy options include:

- Establish "family friendly" welcoming procedures at all staff levels, particularly the center office staff
- Review and improve policies and procedures regarding volunteers in the center, adopting policies that enable working parents and parents from varying cultural and economic backgrounds to participate
- Provide classroom staff with needed support for developing appropriate communication skills in work with diverse parent populations
- Support flexible release time for teachers to meet with parents (noted above) and business flex time for employees to meet with their children's teachers
- Provide child care for parents with younger children who wish to attend volunteer meetings or participate in school activities
- Provide parents with concrete resources, such as materials and guides, for assisting their children at home and at school

**Encouraging Parental Involvement in Decisionmaking**

An additional critical role for parents and other family members involves advocating for school responsiveness to the child's and family's needs and concerns. Decisionmaking and empowerment processes that give families a voice in school programming and promote reciprocity between families and school are linked to successful outcomes as well. Finding ways in which schools support families and families support schools is critical to the success of the early childhood center. Where parents' involvement in policymaking is concerned, it is important to find the proper balance between too much and too little. Decisionmaking, like other facets of the early childhood center program, must be a true partnership. The effort to achieve that goal can be complicated by numerous policies and procedures already in place at the district level. Local policy options include:

- Review the "web of decisionmaking" in the district. Identify how and where parents should be in contact with decisionmakers and provide input from the center through the district and the school board
- Identify ways to encourage parent involvement and minimize paperwork and other discouraging bureaucratic processes
- Institute building-level parent partnership/participation sessions and communication processes that inform and involve parents regarding program decisions and decisionmaking opportunities
- Actively solicit parent input into all center-based reviews and planned innovations
- Review district policies on participation in policymaking and clarify/improve the ways that participation should be structured
- Support the continuous acquisition of decisionmaking skills by parents

**Feature #3: Active community involvement**

Early childhood centers do not exist in a vacuum. They are one of several systems in the community that provide services to young children and their families. Because the early childhood center concept involves a concern with the welfare of the whole child, the provision of comprehensive services, and family support, the center must ensure that parents have access to a range of needed services that serve family strengthening functions.

Early childhood centers, then, must work with the community in terms of service integration efforts. Further, the center must build strong, reciprocal community links. Community members will have opportunities to understand and participate in the early childhood center's design and operations. Equally, children from the center will have opportunities to participate in community activities and functions.

**Collaborating in Service Integration**

Provision of comprehensive support for young children and their families involves the school in working with other service providers to help parents meet their needs. Collaboration around the issue of service integration also anchors the early childhood center by grounding support and providing the needed resources locally where possible.

This collaborative approach demands an increase in teamwork among workers across services, age levels, and professional boundaries. Local policy options include:

- Provide support for educators to develop teamwork skills across services, age levels, and professional boundaries
- Initiate and/or support local collaboratives for service integration
- Provide center and district representation and commitment to collaborative efforts
- Solicit reciprocal relationships with local employers and voluntary agencies

**Community Commitment**

The initial reaction of communities to the *concept* of the early childhood center can represent a challenge. Community representatives may be unfamiliar with the implementation of new educational practices, concerned about the strong involvement of and support of families embedded in the concept, or worried that the center will compete with already existent programs. During start-up, centers must concentrate on gaining community input while providing appropriate and sufficient information to support the early childhood center concept. The formation of the early childhood center must begin with an invitation to community representatives to understand and commit to the concept, including its nontraditional elements and strong involvement with families.

Fostering such input and sustaining community involvement assures the relevance of the outcomes and techniques addressed by the early childhood center. Establishing communication lines and participation opportunities among the early childhood center population and community representatives maintains awareness of local concerns and builds commitment to the center as a whole. Local policy options include:

- Develop frequent communication links between school and community agencies and representatives
- Solicit broad-based input into the design and operation of the early childhood center. Encourage and acknowledge expression of all points of view
- Support local initiatives to engage community members in center activities and school staff and children in community projects

**Support for School-Wide Change**

The types of efforts required for implementation of the early childhood center concept require extensive degrees of innovation leading to systemic change. Such efforts require extended periods of time and support in order to be successful. Environments organized around the assumptions of a "quick fix" and instant results are not conducive to the establishment of lasting restructuring efforts. Careful, planned implementation, monitoring of progress toward identified outcomes, and sustained support are necessary components of effective change efforts. Local policy options for addressing this include:

- Build early childhood restructuring efforts into long-term strategic planning
- Incorporate understanding of the dynamics of change efforts into staff development plans and implementation
- Provide support for the process of change, buffering early childhood centers from inappropriate demands or excessive expectations
- Clarify and interpret to constituents the results of unique assessment approaches as experimentation and shifts in educational practice occur

**Feature #4: A commitment to croviding smooth transitions from the home into the preschool and through the primary grades--whether the preschool program takes place at school or in the community**

As the understanding of effective support to children and families deepens, a new concept of the importance of transitions has emerged. This concept stresses close attention to ensuring continuity of the key elements that characterize good early childhood services, including developmentally appropriate practice, parent involvement, and supportive services to children and families (Lombardi, 1992). In this view, agencies and programs work together in a "client-centered" fashion to adapt their policies and procedures so that fewer adjustments must be made by the children and families they serve.

In the early childhood center approach, children receive supportive preschool services and begin building on the strengths they have developed in their early life. As children enter kindergarten and first-grade environments, they find environments with familiar components and expectations for learning. Equally, families do not have to fill out the same information forms again, or be required to behave in entirely different ways as their children enter a different school setting.

In this approach, school staff reach out to preschool providers by meeting, arranging reciprocal classroom visitations, sharing staff development opportunities, and comparing curriculum approaches. The experiences of children and families in each program are examined, and educators work to make these experiences more continuous. Collaborators examine information sharing methods and work on ways to make these more consistent as well as effective. They would find ways to jointly identify family/community needs and concerns, in particular for preschool services, and work toward solutions.

The early childhood center also works to develop smooth transitions throughout the years each child and family is in the program, promoting continuity of educational and service activities across age levels or other center units.

**Provision of Preschool Services**

Traditionally, school districts have tended to function as though young children and their families were invisible to the system before the entry age of kindergarten. The research base now stresses the value and importance of making an early investment by providing preschool services to all young children and their families.

The early childhood center concept identifies the school as a major stakeholder in the community provision of preschool services. This requires schools to become proficient at identifying, supporting, and/or collaborating with preschool services, if not providing them on site. Policy options for accomplishing this include:

- Maintain an information base of available services for preschool children in the community and the extent to which the need for them is being met
- Collaborate with preschool providers and other community agencies to review and extend needed preschool services
- Provide support for housing preschool services in the early childhood center, where possible
- Work with community groups to identify and develop funding sources for provision of services

**Information Sharing**

The early childhood center concept emphasizes continuous, "seamless" provision of comprehensive services to young children and families. The collaboration which this requires necessitates efforts to develop systems that (1) reduce redundancy of information provided and/or received by families, (2) expedite timely information transfer to collaborators who can maximize preventive service provision to families, and (3) protect confidentiality. Local policy options include:

- Jointly establish confidentiality standards and review of information systems among service providers
- Expedite information transfer from prior service providers (for children and families) directly to service staff at the early childhood center level
- Streamline and unify information request forms and systems across collaborating agencies and programs

**Transition Services**

Ensuring continuity and easing transitions become critical features of the early childhood center approach. Beyond the above identified issues of service integration and information transfer, the school must work to enable the child and family, as they enter the school program, to maintain and improve on the supports and competencies they developed during the years and months prior to entry in the center. The early childhood center then eases such transitions by curriculum alignment into, through, and out of the school program, and by provision of activities for child and family which help them to prepare for and work through the necessary transitions.

In addition, center staff members reciprocally share and exchange goals, methods, and staff development experiences with staff from the local preschool community, developing mutual respect and coordinating services so that the continuity of experience for children and families is maximized. Policy action options include:

- Promote interaction between preschool and school staff regarding staff development and curriculum design/implementation activities
- Promote mutual staff visitations and classroom observations between school and preschool staff
- Work to align curriculum models and implementation methods for children from birth to age eight across agencies and programs
- Establish cross-age teams in the early childhood center to promote continuity of service and design transition activities for children and families

## CONCLUSION

This discussion of local policy options makes it clear that there is a great deal that local schools and school systems can do to facilitate the operation of strong early childhood centers for young children through the age of eight. A key, of course, is mission and leadership. The early childhood center concept must be seen as an asset in achieving the priority outcomes of schooling, as defined by the community and adopted by the local board. Schools considering the implementation of the early childhood center concept should not begin by conceiving the center as an independent program which will somehow be added on to "fix" a problem, but rather should begin with the mission and a strategic plan to achieve it. Sound, locally appropriate action will flow from such action.

These 15 policy issues and the options which local schools have for addressing them also form the basis for examining the larger policy context of the state and the existing options for state leaders to set directions that support and enhance local efforts. That topic is addressed in NWREL's companion piece *Early Childhood Centers: State Policy Options for Restructuring the Support System for Young Learners.* Together these reports identify for policymakers, educators, and others the necessary tools for putting the early childhood concept into action in the Northwest.

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## APPENDIX A:
## SCHOOL-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTERS MODEL SITES

- Nome Elementary, Nome, Alaska
- Tendoy Elementary, Pocatello, Idaho
- Ponderosa Elementary, Billings, Montana
- Centennial Early Childhood Center, Portland, Oregon
- Mary Harrison Primary, Toledo, Oregon
- Aberdeen School District, Aberdeen Washington
- South Colby Elementary, Port Orchard, Washington

## APPENDIX B:
## PARTICIPANTS ATTENDING THE DECISIONMAKERS' FORUM
## JUNE 1992

- Alaska--Jean Ann Alter, Department of Education; and Dave Newton, Nome Elementary
- Idaho--Douglas Jones, State Representative and Vice Chairman of the Education Committee; and Darrell Loosle, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Montana--June Atkins, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Oregon--George Benson, Superintendent, and Barbara Velander, Centennial School District; Gene Derfler, State Representative; Shirley Gold, State Senator; Marilyn Lane and Anita McClanahan, Oregon Department of Education; and Ken Settlemier, Lincoln County School District
- Washington--Mary Carr, State Superintendent of Public Instruction; and Mary Frost, Department of Community Development
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory--Rex Hagans, Acting Director, Child, Family, and Community Program; Jan Jewett and Helen Nissani, Senior Associates, Child, Family, and Community Program; and Laura Walkush, Research Specialist, Child, Family, and Community Program